

## Talk at the Palm Sunday Prayer Rally, April 5, 2009

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I stand here today as a representative of that small group of faculty that supports NDResponse and stands behind the exemplary students who have organized it in reaction to the university administration's announcement that it will honor President Obama at the graduation ceremony in May. Their faithful witness is an inspiration and a shining example even if it is not clear what good, if any, will come of it. For as the Holy Week liturgies remind us, Christian witness is not about power or tangible results. It's about the life-giving truth of the Gospel and about the Father who passionately loves each individual human being.

I also stand here as the parent of four Notre Dame graduates, including a 2009 graduate, a parent who cannot in good conscience—or, in my particular case, without giving scandal—attend my own son's graduation ceremony.

Make no mistake. This protest has to do with President Obama's actions and with his intentions regarding future actions, and not merely with his beliefs.

Now, of course, the administrators of the university do not “condone or endorse his positions”—or, presumably, his actions—“on specific issues regarding the protection of human life.” And, to be sure, it is permissible to honor someone despite the bad things he's done, as long as those bad things are “not all THAT bad.” So let's look at a few of the actions that the administrators of the university consider to be “not all THAT bad.”

President Obama has overturned the Mexico City Policy that had prohibited taxpayer money from going to groups that promote or perform abortions in other nations. “This is bad,” the administrators of the university admit, “but it's not all THAT bad.”

President Obama has, in Michael Gerson's words, “signalled that he will overturn [the previous president's] executive order protecting health workers from firing and discrimination if they refuse to perform actions they consider morally objectionable.” “This is bad,” the administrators of the university admit, “but it's not all THAT bad.”

President Obama has lifted the previous president's already weak-kneed restrictions on the use of taxpayer money for embryo-destructive stem cell research—which research, by the way, unlike non-destructive stem cell research, has yet to result in curing anyone of any disease. “This is bad,” the administrators of the university admit, “but it's not all THAT bad.”

President Obama has nominated an enthusiastically pro-abortion Catholic to become Secretary of Health and Human Services, the department that oversees the medical profession along with other human services. “This is bad,” the administrators of the university admit, “but it's not all THAT bad.”

The list goes on, and the point is absolutely clear. When it comes to issues that bear upon the protection of innocent human lives at its earliest stages, issues which, as one administrator put it, “we care so much about,” there just is no bad action on the part of President Obama that was going to count as “all THAT bad.” No wonder Cardinal George was driven to say, “Whatever else is clear, it is clear that Notre Dame didn't understand what it means to be Catholic when they issued this invitation.”

And, in fairness to President Obama, it is not as if he had not made it perfectly clear before the election what he intended to do. So no one can pretend that the administrators of Our Lady's university, who undoubtedly issued their invitation to the President long before Inauguration Day, were ignorant of his intentions. (In fact, I hear that there was a pre-election New York Times bestseller, written by a Notre Dame graduate, that spelled out those intentions in great detail and with impeccable documentation.) Yes, the administrators knew all this full well, and they nonetheless chose “prestige over truth,” to use Bishop D'Arcy's apt words. In fact, choosing prestige over truth seems to have become something of a way of life around here.

And despite their protestations to the contrary, the administrators of the university have made

themselves complicit in the culture of comfort and convenience over against the culture of sacrifice and self-giving; they have made themselves complicit in the culture of fearfulness and quiet despair over against the culture of gratitude to and hope in the Father of Our Lord Jesus Christ; they have made themselves complicit in the culture of individual autonomy and individual self-creation over against the culture of faithful and enduring commitment and of shared dependency within a rich communal life—and, sad to say, they have done it under the mantle of the Catholic Faith which they profess with their lips. This would be sobering even if we didn't find ourselves at the beginning of Holy Week.

Today we have prayed to Our Lady and her Son in atonement for this betrayal, as well as in atonement for our own individual failures to bring the life-giving and liberating message of the Gospel to those around us. Mary is the patroness not only of this university, but also of the Congregation of Holy Cross, under the title of Our Lady of Sorrows. Think of the Fourth and Thirteenth Stations of the Cross. Think of Mary standing under the cross, joining her unspeakable suffering to the suffering of her Son. Think of the hardships—the crosses, if you will—joyfully embraced by that hardy group of immigrants, Father Sorin and his companions, in order to found this school.

May these examples inspire us all to re-dedicate ourselves to the proposition that Catholic universities have the most to offer our culture when they are not afraid to be distinctive, when they do not accept the facile assumption that intellectual excellence and fidelity to Christ need to be balanced off against one another, when they do not value worldly glory and prestige more than the truth that sets us free.

Mary, Mother of Sorrows, pray for us.